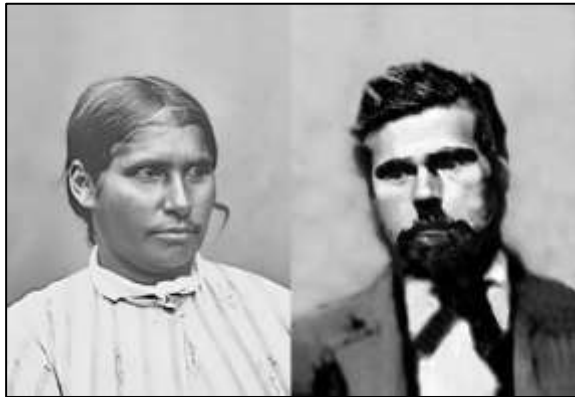


LOUISA BRIGGS (1836-1925)

Louisa & John Briggs



Louisa Briggs nee Strugnell was a member of the Bunurong (aka Bunwurrung or Boonwurrong) coastal tribe of the Kulin Nation people of Victoria. The Bunurong country was south of the Woiwurrung, starting from near Werribee in the west, across the top of Port Phillip Bay, then south-east to Moe and down to Wilsons Promontory, then back along the coast to Point Nepean and Portsea. They were known as the Port Philip or Western Port tribe and had close ties to the Wurundjeri clans of the Woiwurrung tribe who were their northern neighbours.

Louisa Briggs has been officially recognised by the Victorian Government and the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council as one of the ancestors from whom Bunurong descent is established.¹ The City of Brimbank acknowledges that Bunurong people are the Traditional Custodians of the land on the southern boundary of the municipality, and therefore Louisa is one of the few First Nations women with a connection to Brimbank about whom there is extant documentation from the early 1800s.

However, some of the references about Louisa's birth and early life are inconsistent. Was she born in 1818 or 1836? Was she born in Port Phillip or on Preservation Island? Was she kidnapped in 1833 or 1836? Was her mother Mary Munro or Truganini?

At the time of Louisa's death in 1925, several newspapers reported she was born around 1818 and was directly related to "Queen Truganini" and "King John".² Several sources state that Louisa's mother was Truganini. Of course, being directly related to them does not necessarily mean they were her parents.

If Louisa was born in 1818, then she married at age 33 and her first child (Henry) was born when she was aged 34, which seems unusual for the times. Henry was born in 1852, which suggests that Louisa was probably born in the 1830s.

In the 1830s, Louisa Strugnell was a young child with a group of women from near Point Nepean when they were kidnapped by Tasmanian sealers and taken to Preservation Island in Bass Strait, where they were sold or traded as slaves. One version of the family history is that Louisa, her mother Mary Munro, and her aunt Ann Munro, were kidnapped from Port Phillip Bay by Tasmanian sealers.³ At this stage Port Phillip was technically out of bounds for colonial settlers but the Sydney authorities did not have a presence along this southern boundary of their colony - there were no local authorities to whom one could report such atrocities, so the Tasmanian kidnappers got away with it.

Mary Polly Munro



According to information on Ancestry.com,⁴ Louisa Esmail Truganne Strugnell was born in 1836 on Preservation Island, Bass Strait, although other sources indicate she was born in Port Phillip (Victoria). Louisa was tall, had blue eyes and dark, straight or wavy hair. She adopted Western ways and was raised as a Christian. Louisa's parents were John Strugnell (1801-1842) and Mary Polly Munro (1823-1884). Mary was born about 1823 at Point Nepean, Port Phillip, and her mother Margery (Doog-by-er-um-bor-oke) was kidnapped from Port Phillip. Margery was a Woiwurrung woman and Mary being born at Point Nepean indicates a connection to Boonwurrung country, so they were people of the Kulin nation. John Strugnell was from Middlesex County, England; at age 15 he was convicted of grand larceny and transported for seven years, arriving in

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_Briggs

² South Eastern Times South Australia 22 September 1925 p4

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_Briggs

⁴ There are many listings for John and Louisa Briggs on Ancestry.com. The main source for this article is the site maintained by VanessaA_H of Tasmania, Australia.

Sydney in 1819 and ending up in Tasmania, from where he worked predominantly as a sealer. Strugnell possibly had two wives, Mary Munro and Truganini, though there is little evidence of the latter marriage.

According to Wikipedia, Louisa Briggs said in a 1924 interview that she was taken with her mother as a child to Tasmania in a small boat, that her mother was named Mary, her grandmother Marjorie was from Melbourne, and her father was John Strugnell. In an earlier report from 1885, she said she had been born in 1836 and her burial records indicate she was born in 1836. John William Briggs, her husband, said that Louisa's mother and aunt had been abducted and taken to Tasmania, around 1837. This information is consistent with that currently on Ancestry.com. Louisa's mother was Mary Polly Munro (born in Point Nepean in 1823, married to John Strugnell), and her grandmother was Margery Doog-by-er-um-bor-oke (born in 1810, kidnapped from Port Phillip, married to James Munro). Louisa's aunt was Ann (Nancy) Munro who was born in 1824 and married to John William Briggs.

As Louisa was born in 1836, she could not have been one of the women or girls who were kidnapped at Point Nepean in 1833 by George Meredith, as is occasionally suggested. When researching these abductions, Marie Fels concluded that between March and May 1833, eight women and one boy were kidnapped from Arthurs Seat and taken to the islands in the Bass Strait. Among the women were wives of headmen Betbenjee, Big Benbow, Budgery Tom, and Derrimut.¹ However, there are other cases of Kulin women being abducted from Port Phillip by sealers, not only those in 1833.

Louisa & John Briggs with children



Louisa Esmal (Esme) Truganne Strugnell grew up on Preservation Island. In 1851 she married John William Briggs, who was of Tasmanian birth – she was 15 and he was 24. Louisa was John's second wife; as he had previously (in 1844) married Ann (Nancy) Munro, who was Louisa Strugnell's aunt. Louisa and John raised ten children between 1852 and 1871; they were mostly born in Victoria but one may have been adopted. John William Briggs was born in 1820 in Triabunna, Tasmania, to George William Christopher Lamuel Briggs and Wobberertee (Margaret) Palawa, whose mother was Tanalipunya and father was Manalagenna, the Chief Elder of Palawa people at Oyster Bay. George Briggs' family history goes back to the 1700s in Woburn, Bedfordshire, England. George was charged with criminal offences in 1810 at age 18, and again in 1827, when he was sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). Margaret's family background goes back to about 1700 around Georges Bay, Cape Portland, Tasmania.

Ann (Nancy) Munro was born in 1824 to James Munro and Doog-by-er-um-bor-oke (Margery Munro). James Munro was born in 1779 in London and was convicted of grand larceny in 1799 and sentenced to transportation.² Margery was born in 1810 to Samuel Tomlins and Poolrerrener. Tomlins was another British convict; he was born about 1782 and sentenced to transportation in 1803. Poolrerrener was born in 1792 in Ringarooma, Tasmania, and died in 1835; she was a Trawlwoolway woman from the area around Cape Portland.

Louisa Strugnell and Ann Munro with their children came with their husband, John William Briggs, to Victoria in the goldrush era of the early 1850s. In 1853, John Briggs with his family of two wives and children settled on the privately owned Eurambeen Station near Beaufort, where they worked as labourers and shepherds. They lived independently from any government assistance until the early 1870s. Briggs went gold prospecting for a while but it seems that he mostly worked on Eurambeen:

¹ Marie Hansen Fels, *'I Succeeded Once': The Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula, 1839–1840*. Aboriginal History Inc and ANU E Press, with Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 2011.

² James Munro was a sealer who abducted, bartered for, and purchased women. An 1836 report stated that he paid £7 for one of the women abducted by George Meredith in the 1830s.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_Briggs

"In November 1857, John was earning £58 and meals, pitching hay and carting split timber from the mountains. In 1858, his wages rose to £70 and meals. Briggs, not unlike many non-Indigenous workers of the time, went off to the diggings in March but returned to build a new hut on the station, and other bush work such as cutting bark at sixpence a sheet."¹

The Victorian economy weakened in the 1860s as the gold boom declined, and John and Louisa found it harder to find employment. In 1871 the family moved to the Coranderrk Aboriginal Mission at Healesville, which the Victorian government had created for the resettlement of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people. The reserve was created in 1863 under the leadership of Rev. John Green on behalf of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, and Simon Wonga and William Barak who were from the Woiwurrung tribe of the Kulin people. Here the Briggs family became church-going Presbyterians. Louisa may have become an influential elder here amongst her Boonwurrung people who were also of the Kulin nation. Research by Marguerita Stephens and Fay Stewart-Muir shows that Louisa and John ('Jack') became significant players in Coranderrk's struggle for independence and support for Kulin people's rights:

"Thereafter the fate of the Boonwurrung 'coast' people, went largely unrecorded until May 1872, when the Board for the Protection of Aborigines noted the presence of Jack (sic) Briggs, his wife Louisa and their 10 children at Coranderrk. By then Jack and Louisa Briggs had established themselves among the most forthright in support of Kulin rights, each of them playing prominent roles in the decades-long fight to save Coranderrk from attempts by the Board to sell it off. Jack Briggs was of Palawa, Tasmanian descent; Louisa was one of the Boonwurrung wives and daughters of Deremet, Benbenjer Pudg.ger.re, Budgery Tom and Baddourup Big Benbow, kidnapped by sealers from the beach below Arthur's Seat around 1833, with the young Yonker Yonker, and taken to Preservation Island in Bass Strait. Louise's return to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s, and subsequent move to Coranderrk with her husband and children, secured the age-old occupation with the Boonwurrung on their own country."²

In 1874 there was a major tragedy in the family when Louisa's first-born child, Henry, died at age 21 years while herding cattle:

"Harry (sic) Briggs, living at the Coranderrk station was drowned on Monday last, the 22nd instant, whilst attempting to cross Rourke's Flat. He and three others were going after cattle, when his horse went off the raised road and began to swim. Thinking, probably, he could get on safer by himself, he, being a good swimmer, let go the horse. He was, however, too heavily weighted with the clothes he was wearing, and, getting exhausted, began to sink. He called to his mates, "Save me, save me," but sank before one of the party, who was swimming towards him, could reach him. The flood is the greatest we have had for many years up here."³



Young women at Coranderrk

¹ <https://www.ancestry.com.au>

² Marguerita Stephens & Fay Stewart-Muir. *The Years of Terror: Banbu-Deen – Kulin and Colonists at Port Phillip 1835-1851* p421.

³ Leader 27 June 1874 p19

Louisa attained a position of responsibility at Coranderrk - there was a dormitory for orphaned girls who were under her charge. There were about 20 girls on the station and their ages ranged from three up to 18 years. In 1876 a newspaper's lengthy report of the establishment referred to Louisa Briggs as:

*"... a most resolute and purpose-like person. She is matron of the establishment, on a salary of 10s. a week, and manages the affairs of the children and young people 'in school' with the utmost vigilance and much success. She is their cook and laundress, and general monitor and gouvernante. Not much can go on among them without her knowing of it, but the control she exercises is all for her subjects' good. She is also the accoucheuse in ordinary of the establishment, the general nurse in sickness, and a handy and vigorous all-round administrator. Coranderrk could not be what it is without Mrs. Briggs."*¹

The Briggs family came to Coranderrk in 1871, so how did Louisa develop such advanced skills within five years without, apparently, attending higher education? Of course, First Nations women were well-versed in midwifery, childcare and nursing from their lived experiences, but it's likely that Louisa also had a mentor in Mary Green,² the wife of Coranderrk's superintendent, John Green. There might have been an affinity between Mary and Louisa, in that the achievements of missionary wives and Aboriginal women received much less public recognition than men's endeavours.³

While her husband was the station manager, Mary Green was in charge of the children's dormitory, taught in the school, served as a midwife, and dispensed medicines to the sick.⁴ It's likely that Mary and Louisa worked in tandem. Louisa also acted as a nurse and dormitory matron and was appointed as a salaried staff member in 1876, apparently the first Aboriginal woman to be paid for such services. She also helped articulate residents' needs. Laura Barwick writes that:

*"Louisa's leadership and hereditary right made her a spokesperson. She had learned to read, but not to write, so her children acted as scribes for her numerous letters of protest. When the popular manager was replaced, Louisa fought the plans to sell Coranderrk and to relocate its residents. To this end she gave evidence in August 1876 at an inquiry into the running of the station. Widowed in 1878, after further protests Louisa was forced off the reserve, seeking asylum at Ebenezer Aboriginal station, Lake Hindmarsh, where she again acted as a matron. Conditions there were poor and she wrote to the board to complain of the lack of food in 1878 and again in 1881. Following another inquiry into Coranderrk, Louisa returned to the station in 1882 and was left briefly in charge of the dormitory."*⁵

The 1870s were tough times for the Briggs family. Louisa's first-born child, Henry, died in 1874 at age 21 years. Her husband John died in 1878 at age 58 years. The 1880s were even tougher as several other family members died. Louisa's mother Mary Polly Munro died at Coranderrk in 1884 at age 61. Her aunt, Ann (Nancy) Munro, died in 1884 at age 60. Two of Louisa's daughters also died: Ellen in 1884 at age 13, and Lydia in 1885 at age 31.

John & Mary Green



John and Mary Green had established collaborative rather than authoritarian relationships with the Coranderrk residents, which proved very successful, though there was some dissent from leaders such as Simon Wonga and William Barak; however, these differences were resolved amicably. The Greens were removed from their positions at the station in 1874, and Reverend Frederick Strickland was appointed as the new station manager. Conditions at Coranderrk then deteriorated and residents started complaining of malnourishment, disease, and incompetent management. In 1876 Louisa was a witness at the

¹ Argus 1 September 1876 p7

² Mary Smith Benton Green was born in Scotland 1835 and came to Victoria with her husband John Green in 1857. They worked in the goldfields as a bush missionaries to the Europeans before John was appointed as manager of Coranderrk when it was established in 1863.

³ Hazel Poulter argues that "Aboriginal society was not male dominated as many people are mistakenly led to believe. There were both male and female Councils of Elders, with women having an equal authority. However, British historians and anthropologists were only ever interested in asking questions about male authority. And this probably said more about British and European culture than it did about Aboriginal culture." Hazel Poulter. *Templestowe – A Folk History*. Revised edition 2015, p52.

⁴ http://www.minutesofevidence.com.au/static/media/uploads/Book%20Excerpts/excerpt_-_john_green.pdf

⁵ Laura Barwick, 'Briggs, Louisa (1836–1925)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/briggs-louisa-12816/text23133>

Healesville Courthouse investigation when she reported inadequate medical care, citing the death of a young woman and her still-born baby.¹

Matters worsened when residents began reading in newspapers that the Coranderrk managers wanted to expel the almost 100 residents and sell the station.² The allegations against Strickland included the unauthorised sale of government-owned property, drunkenness, and the beating of a young boy. This led to a parliamentary intervention in 1881, when a Board of Inquiry was appointed to investigate the management and conditions at Coranderrk. The residents documented their position succinctly in several letters, and John and William Briggs were some of the signatories:

*"Coranderrk, Sept. 5, 1881. The only complaint we have is this - we all wish Mr. Green back here in Mr. Strickland's position. Mr. Strickland is not a fit man here in regards to work, and also to the sick people. He has no idea of tilling the ground or making any improvements on the station, or doing any good for the welfare of the blacks there. No potatoes or hay here on the station, and the station ought to keep itself in meat, but it does not. We all have to buy meat. When Mr. Green was here he used to be doing what Mr. Strickland is doing now, that is, he used to preach the Gospel and also do what Mr. Captain Page is doing now as an inspector, and made a good improvement, and now it takes three men and there is no improvement. If Mr. Green had the use of the money, what is laid out now since he left there would something what the station would be able to pay back. We are all sure if we had Mr Green back the station would self-support itself. No wonder the visitor that come here and goes away, and say that station ought to be sold, when we won't be allowed to clear the ground. The central boards and manager, too, are only leaving this open for to give room to the white people to have something to say about it. The only thing we wish is Mr. Green removed back here, and then they will see that station will improve better, and will also see that those who speak against us will see we have a head manager of us. So that all we all have to say. (Signed) Wm. Barak, Thos. Banfield, Dick Richard, Thos. Avoca, Terrick Johnny, Thos. Gillman, Lankey, Willie Hamilton, Aleck Campbell, Thos. Dunolly, Martin Simpson, Alfd. Morgan, H. Harmony, R. Wandon, J. Briggs."*³



Louisa Briggs (centre) and colleagues at Coranderrk

¹ Age 29 August 1876 p5

² As Coranderrk was becoming a successful farm, some nearby squatters lobbied for the land to be sold so they could extend their properties.

³ Argus 19 November 1881 p10

The letter-writing campaign continued in 1882, including correspondence to Victorian Member of Parliament Alfred Deakin, who passed on the letters to The Age for publication:

*"Coranderrk, 19th February, 1882. Alfred Deakin, Esq., M.P. Dear Sir, I have the honor of writing you a few lines. Would you be kind enough to do us a favor in helping Mrs. Bon and Dr. Embling to carry out these wishes for us, that we don't want a strange manager here, only the one we ask for, and that is Mr. Green; and the station to be under the Chief Secretary, and the board of management to be dismissed; and we also would ask you favor would it be acceptable for us all to come down (let us know), and dismissed the present inspector; and we would like the things done before hop-picking, please. We are not children for the board to do as they like with us any longer. They have done it long enough, so we hope you will try and do us a favor, please. We are your most obedient servants, Wm. Barak, Thos. Avoca, Thos. Gilman. Lankey Manton, Jack Logan, Tom Spider, Alfred Morgan, Robert Wandon, Willie Parker, Thos. Mickie, Dick Richards, Lankey, Wm. Hamilton, Sam Rowan, Thos. Dunolly, Henry Harmony, W. Briggs."*¹

*"Coranderrk, 19th February, 1882. The hon. J. M. Grant, Chief Secretary. Dear sir, We informed you by these few lines that we don't want a strange manager here - only the one we ask for, please. We also don't want the central boards and the present inspector to be no longer over us. We are, your most obedient servants, Wm. Barak, Lankey, Jack Logan, Thos. Avoca, Lankey Manton, Sam Rowan, Dick Richard, Wm. Hamilton, Tom Spider, Thos. Mickie, Thos. Gilman, Alfred Morgan, Willie Parker, Thos. Dunolly, Robt. Wandon, Henry Harmony, Wm. Briggs, Martin Simpson, Alfred Davis, J. Charles, Dick Rowan. P.S. Please would you be kind enough to give us our wishes."*²

The inquiry backed Coranderrk residents' claims of poor management and recommended the station stay where it was. However, this victory did not stop other inevitable changes. In 1886 legislation was passed to force persons of mixed descent under the age of 35 off the reserves. Louisa Briggs, now a fifty-year-old widow with several children and grandchildren under 35, had to leave Coranderrk and moved to the Maloga mission in New South Wales, where she worked as a baker. In 1889 she moved to Cummeragunja (north of Echuca) near Barmah on the Murray River. In 1892 she asked to return to Coranderrk but was refused. In 1895 persons of mixed descent were also excluded from Cummeragunja, forcing the family to a makeshift camp at Barmah. Fortunately, Louisa was later able to return to Cummeragunja, where she continued advocating for her people's rights.

Louisa Briggs died at Cummeragunja in 1925 at age 88 years.³ Some media reports mention that she died at age 107 years, which is not correct. Brief notes of her passing were included in several regional newspapers, as well as Melbourne's The Age. A longer article was published in many papers including the West Australian, Launceston Examiner, Hobart Mercury, the Sydney Morning Herald, Queensland Times, Perth's North-Eastern Courier, etc. The South Australian South-Eastern Times published the longer report, referring to Louisa as a notable person:

Louisa Briggs c.1905



*"Louisa Briggs ... died at the Cumeragunga (New South Wales) aboriginal station on September 8 at the great age of 107 years. She was directly related to "King John" and "Queen Truganini," and was, therefore, the absolute last of the Tasmanians. She was a fine type of [person]. Her hair was snow white. She had a constitution of iron, and was a very heavy smoker, but did not indulge in intoxicants. She was a prolific reader of good literature, but still she was as happy as any child when able to see a comic paper. She was in possession of all her faculties up to 12 months ago, and at short periods since. Louisa left Tasmania when in her teens, crossing to Victoria in an old sailing clipper. She married and set out with her husband to the goldfields. From there she wandered to Warrnambool, thence to the Maloga Mission, where for many years she acted as baker to the whole camp. Finally she moved with the rest of her people to the present Government station of Cumeragunga. Louisa was buried in the station cemetery with full religious rites, the service being read by one of her relatives. The school children made a large wreath of violets, which was laid on the grave."*⁴

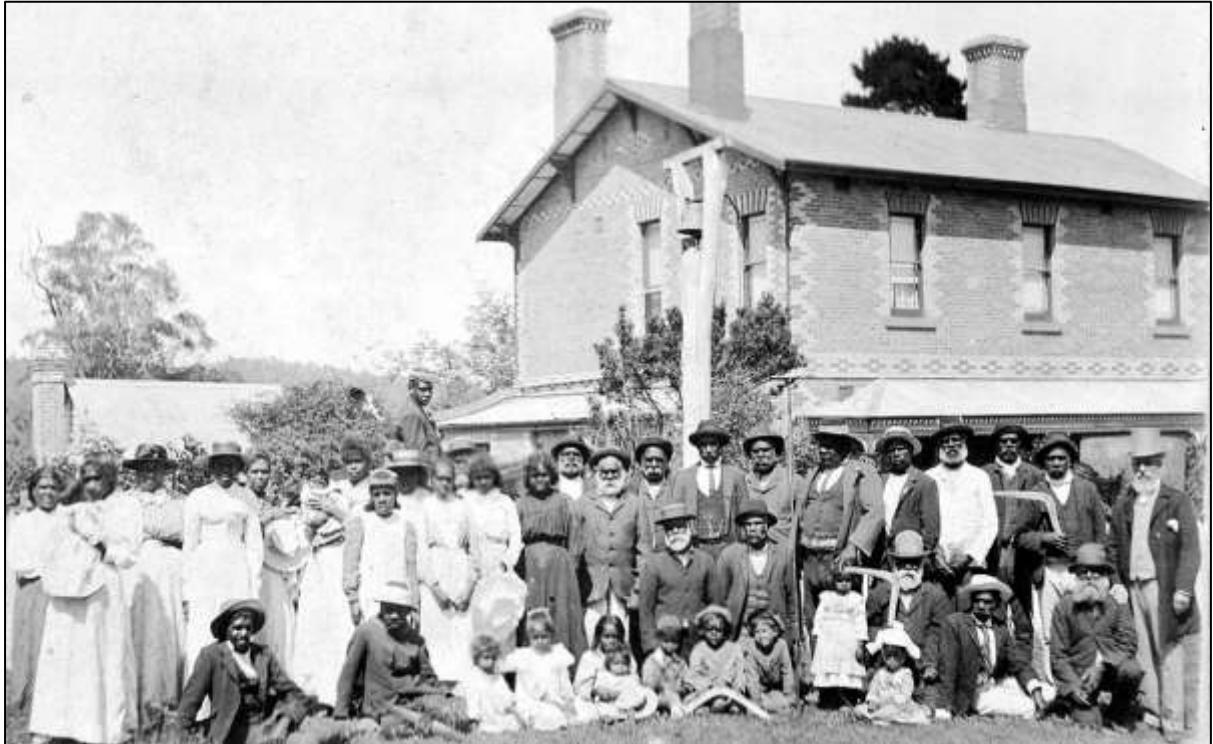
Louisa Briggs' ancestral line continues through her great-granddaughter, N'arweat Carolyn Briggs AM an Aboriginal Australian rights activist who is a Yaluk-ut Weelam and Boon Wurrung elder, and serves as the Boon Wurrung representative in the City of Port Phillip.

¹ Age 25 February 1882 p7

² Age 25 February 1882 p7

³ <https://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/briggs-louisa-12816>

⁴ South Eastern Times, South Australia 22 September 1925 p4



Residents of Coranderrk station in the late 1800s

<https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/news-stories/the-legacy-and-closure-of-coranderrk-station/#prior>



Teacher Thomas James (left) with schoolchildren at Cummeragunja